

WILMER CAVE WRIGHT, PH. D.

1865-1951

*Contributor to the History and Culture of Medicine**

We owe so deep a debt to so many sciences and arts, to professions and laborers not primarily concerned with medicine, surgery or the vocations of public health, to historians, poets and philosophers as well as to all those of past and present centuries who have had curiosity to observe, record, understand and describe the performance of living matter, that we may with a like sense of obligation pay admiring tribute to a scholar in Greek and Latin who gave of herself unstintingly and with great devotion to the translation and historical setting of several authors hitherto inaccessible in ready form in English for physicians of today.

If our brave company of doctors of medicine were but authorized to offer distinction by the giving of honorary degrees, we of The New York Academy of Medicine would have been well advised to express our recognition of professional eminence in some such manner to Professor Emeritus Wilmer Cave Wright of Bryn Mawr, whose name appears on the title page of three bilingual volumes of the History of Medicine Series, issued under the auspices of our Library, Nos. 2, 7 and 10. As a matter of fact, the first of the Series in date of publication, *De contagione* by Hieronymus Fracastorius, 1930, and at the time of her death, the last, *De aneurysmatibus* by Giovanni Maria Lancisi, 1951, of the History of Medicine Series, were gifts of this talented scholar to the culture, rather than to the science of medicine.

Emily Wilmer Cave France was born January 21, 1865, in England, daughter of William Haumer France, of Birmingham, England, and F. E. Cave-Brown Cave, his wife. Her education was at home where she listened to the tutor employed in preparing

her elder brother, Geoffrey, for college. She had a younger sister Georgie, Mrs. Arthur Gaskin. She attended the College of Science at Birmingham and entered Girton College, Cambridge, England, in 1888. She held a college scholarship and graduated in 1892 with Honours, passing the Cambridge Classical Tripos, Pt. 1, Cl. II, div. 1.

She came to the United States in 1892 with her classmate and life long friend, Isabel Maddison. In 1892-93 she was Fellow in Greek at Bryn Mawr College studying under the late Prof. Paul Shorey. From 1893 to 1896 she was first Fellow in Latin, then Fellow in Greek, and then Reader in Latin and Greek under Prof. Paul Shorey at the University of Chicago, receiving in 1895 the Ph. D. degree and the Gamble Prize for her essay entitled "The relation of the Emperor Julian to the new Sophistic and neo-Platonist thought, with a study of his sources and style." Returning to Bryn Mawr College in 1897, she was Reader in Classical Literature 1897-1899, Associate in Classical Literature 1899-1901, Associate in Greek 1901-1907, Associate Professor of Greek from 1907 to 1921 and Professor of Greek from 1921 until her retirement in 1933.

In 1907 she married J. Edmund Wright, professor of mathematics at Bryn Mawr. After his death from bacterial endocarditis in 1910, she adopted a little English girl and in later years took great delight in this daughter's children.

Her publications during this academic life were: *A Short History of Greece from Homer to Julian*, New York, 1907 and, as translator and editor for the Loeb Library, *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3 vols., 1913-23 and Philostratus and Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists*, 1922.

* Manuscript received September 1953.

She led the austere and necessarily thrifty life of the dedicated teacher and student in the campus home she made with her companion Miss Isabel Maddison in Low Buildings, sharing in the social community of the faculty and student body and a circle of friends in and about Bryn Mawr. For the last eighteen years her home was in a modest apartment across the way from the college library. Here she kept house, received her friends, enjoyed her gardening and worked on the several translations for the Academy of Medicine series.

An appreciation of her qualities and her influence upon her students and throughout the years of her retirement increasingly among alumnae who had shared in the courses she offered can best be had from an article by two of them in the *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, Winter 1952, from which the following is quoted with the permission of the authors: Ruth McAneny Loud and Dorothy Burr Thompson, both graduates of the class of '23.

"Wilmer Cave Wright's legacy to her students and her friends is a powerful and provocative personality. She came to teach at Bryn Mawr in 1897, one of the colorful generation attracted by President Thomas that set the College in the great tradition. A former student likens her to Pallas Athene herself, walking the earth with a proud look and the clank of silver.

"We took her courses for the direct impact they gave us of the world of Greece and Rome—and she in turn delighted in the company of students interested in learning more of the classics. We kept going back to her in the years after graduation for actively concerned and loyal friendship, her immediate wit, and her astute, pungent commentaries. And we will remember her with a grateful sense of gain for her scepticism and her frankness, and for her inordinate capacity for taking pains, but chiefly for her abounding relish for life.

"Mrs. Wright made no concessions to the changes in the world, nor did she change herself. At 80 as at 60, she was as interested in our families and our jobs, as pithy about the most recent scandal or appointee, as fearful of giving us her cold. Her study—with its cluttered desk hung casually

with strings of beads, a glass of milk forgotten among the books, and Winston Churchill prominent among the many personal photographs on the walls—was the study of an Englishwoman. She remained a determinedly British subject throughout her 83 years, taking satisfaction in retaining manners and idiosyncracies, and she strode the walks of Bryn Mawr as though they were a heath. She never ceased thinking and speaking of the English as 'We' and Americans as 'You,' once even going so far as to predict 'You're going to have a storm'!

"Wilmer Wright was a Du Maurier period piece. As were all the intellectual English of her day, she was essentially Greek—and in appearance strikingly like an archaic statue. Her love of heavy jewelry brought richness and surprise into her classroom, for she wore, her strings of amber and of turquoise, her massive rings and silver bracelets, not singly but all together. Yet she remained fundamentally austere, no make-up, no gesture to contemporary fashion. Her voice was extraordinarily rich, the perfect instrument with which to teach us to scan by ear rather than by rule; with which to read, in English, French, German, Italian, Latin or Greek, the poetry in which she found her own emotional outlet. . .

"She somehow conveyed an idea of beauties undiscovered and of mysteries unsolved in literature before us. To sit in her classes was a lesson in precision and scholarship, but even more it was one in the beauty and magic of the Greek. . .

"She had long lived in the world of books, even though handicapped since childhood by myopia, and she covered a great amount of scholarly ground although what she actually produced was in no way proportionate to her learning. Insistence on minutiae and the pursuit of a point until she had it exactly where she wanted it precluded any major creative work, but she knew thoroughly and accurately everything that she undertook. And in her *vita nuova*, as Dr. Chew called her years after retirement, her competence with her tools was a priceless asset. . .

"Mrs. Wright's own letters to friends gave the most telling picture of how eagerly

her mind worked. Her statements were frequently sweeping and arbitrary, but her comments always cogent and they highlighted an eclectic lot of enthusiasms. These included everything that affected her neighborhood—its civic development, its trees, its real estate deals and its old ladies. She had concern; and was generous with her money and attention, for all who needed a neighbor. A true Englishwoman, her garden gave her particular delight. She had much satisfaction in vying with the Scotch gardeners in the vicinity, and in busying herself with her winter roses or her ailing hawthorne. . .

"The 'hard, gem-like flame' that she maintained in all her relationships made it impossible to counter with less than one's best. For this we thank her, and for the appetite she gave us for classical literature and study as a civilized taste and a delight—the world where she herself moved so surely and so freely."

Her interest in and contribution to medical history and culture came about in the most natural way as an outgrowth of conversations, dialogues, questions and answers at the hearth and table side of friends with whom she made visits in city and country, filled as always in her presence by searching provocative talk that most commonly centered about the lives of persons known to present company, their limitations, excellences, and in the sicknesses and causes of their deaths. Many were the comparisons made with the imagined or reported medical episodes in the lives of ancient potentates and classical personalities.

The chance possession by the present author of an original 1546 edition of *De contagione* by medicine's first epidemiologist, and first describer of the self-perpetuating "seminaria of disease" as a living cause of various communicable diseases, Hieronymus Fracastorius, led off a full scale discussion of ancient and modern beliefs and the miracles of etiology as nowadays revealed. Wilmer Wright's offer to give a bilingual edition of this precious and then little known book to The New York Academy of Medicine for its pioneer series of medical history volumes set her on a path of inquiry, travel abroad, high

scholarship and intellectual contribution for which we doctors of office, bedside, hospital, laboratory and public health careers can make no adequate return unless by memory's sense of obligation.

The twenty-four years from 1927, when Wilmer Wright took up this new career of medical translator and interpreter, to 1951 when she put into the hands of the Library Publication Fund Committee of The New York Academy of Medicine the final manuscript for the bilingual *De aneurysmatibus* of Lancisi, her third and final contribution, a few short months before her death, were filled for me with a multitude of intellectual explorations, discoveries of new meanings of old words and exchanges of ideas, illuminated by her encyclopedic memory, her rigid integrity in each least as well as major matter of fact and by the rich depth and breadth of her learning. It was indeed a rare privilege to be admitted to her study, to share in probable meanings of uncertain phrases of the great physicians she dealt with and to sense the reality and strength of the distinguished personalities as she revealed them in her introductions and the voluminous notes. Fracastorius, Ramazzini and Lancisi stand before us as vividly as though of our generation.

Swiftly she seized the spirit of those distinguished clinicians and gave them background and citizen, religious and political characteristics. Their loyalties, controversies, correspondence with the best minds of their times roused her concern and respect and their portraits in their own words are as revealing as are the engravings of their features.

Wilmer Wright had had little of the biology and natural sciences other than the basic and classic approaches of the Greeks, but when a mind trained as hers was in the humanities meets the terms, the descriptions, the reasonings from cause to effect as offered by the high minds of biology and medicine she hears in their words the simple truths which the truly great find easy to relate.

Our generous benefactor, selfless contributor to our understanding of some of the minds and principles of thought and ex-

pression of our medical forbears of Italy of the late 16th and through to the first quarter of the 18th Century, has left with us a permanent record of flawless scholarship and integrity which those so fortunate as to share her friendship found closely knit with a social charm, and rapid response of wit and wisdom that made her the center of any company she graced.

Appreciative reviews of the posthumous publication of the *De aneurysmatibus* in the *American Heart Journal** and in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*** express the universal praise for the translator and note the quality of rare readability, as in the following from these periodicals:

"The work is distinguished by scientifically recorded case histories and autopsy reports. Lancisi was one of the first to recognize definitely a relationship between syphilis and arterial disease; cases with a positive history he called aneurysma Gallicum! The translation is all that could be desired, as one would expect from Mrs. Wright's scholarly renderings of two other classics, Fracastorius on contagium vivum and Ramazzini on occupational diseases. A professor of Greek, she was not of the medical profession, but certainly deserved well of it; her death last year was a misfortune."*

"Too often medical classics are considered to be dull reading and so lie neglected on the shelves of physicians and in libraries. This volume is a notable exception in that it is filled with many stimulating and even exciting case histories with autopsy findings that are beautifully presented, and one feels the enthusiasm that undoubtedly contributed markedly to Lancisi's reputation as a great teacher. The book is recommended reading for all physicians and especially for all students of cardiovascular diseases."**

Wilmer Wright never really retired and never withdrew from the privileges of life she cherished. Arterial thrombosis gave her but a brief few days of rapidly failing strength and consciousness. Her family physician attended her in her home where death came on November 16, 1951. Her wish for cremation was respected and no formal services were held. She came to Bryn Mawr a stranger, an English scholar, gentle, friendly and a competent teacher. She was the little college community's leading citizen when she left this life, still a British subject, a scholar of wide repute, a relentless searcher for the truth in all ages, and wise in her choice of words to express the precious experiences of life in the fellowship of neighbors and friends.

HAVEN EMERSON

* Book reviews. *Amer. Heart J.* 45:315, 1953.

**Book reviews. *J. Amer. med. Assoc.* 151:250, 1953.